

## CONQUERING THE GREAT RAFT

**F**rench explorers, venturing off the Mississippi River via the Red River to gain access to the Midwest, encountered a log jam that was already centuries old. This incredible natural pileup was important enough in engineering history to merit its own capitalized name.

*It was called the Great Raft.*

The jam began at the mouth of the river and grew over hundreds of years as each rain upstream washed down new timber. By the 1800s the log jam extended upstream more than 100 miles and backed up dammed water still another 65 miles.

Navigators as early as 1719 learned to skirt The Raft by crossing the flooded prairies through impounded water.

Throughout the middle years of the 1800s, Army Engineers worked to drive a temporary and then a permanent channel through the jam. They worked at their task, beset by mosquitoes "like huge gray clouds," as well as the accompanying yellow fever that felled many.

When a permanent channel was finally secured in 1873, the work was acclaimed as one of the great engineering feats of the 19th Century.<sup>5</sup>

**Snags, snares, and log jams: river travel on the Arkansas and Red Rivers was a treacherous affair.**

